

Zapadni Cesko-Bratreske Jednoty Hall No. 53  
(Z.C.B.J.)  
Fifth Avenue  
Niobrara  
Knox County  
Nebraska

HABS No. NE-34

HABS,  
NEB,  
54-NIVE  
12 -

PHOTOGRAPHS  
HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA  
REDUCED COPIES OF MEASURED DRAWINGS

Historic American Buildings Survey  
Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service  
Department of the Interior  
Washington, D.C. 20243

## HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

HABS No. NE-34

## ZAPADNI CESKO-BRATRSKE JEDNOTY (Z.C.B.J.) HALL NUMBER 53

- Location: West side of Fifth Avenue, 150' north of the intersection with Maple Street, Niobrara, Knox County, Nebraska.
- USGS Niobrara Quadrangle, Universal Transverse Mercator Coordinates: 14.579500.4733730.
- Present Owner: United States of America (U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Omaha District).
- Present Use: Vacant, scheduled to be demolished. (Demolished after this documentation was written in 1977).
- Significance: From 1909 to the late 1970s, the Zapadni Cesko-Bratreske Jednoty (Z.C.B.J.) Hall No. 53 was the social and fraternal center for Czechoslovakian immigrants and their descendants. The hall was also significant for its contribution to the social history of the Slavic people in America. Architecturally, the hall was the finest example of a fraternal lodge of its kind in Nebraska.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

## A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: The Z.C.B.J. Hall was built in 1909, but it was not finished until the following year. Although stage productions were already occurring early in 1910, the hall, according to a publication, Niobrara Centennial, 1856-1956, page 37, was formally dedicated on June 17, 1910.
2. Architect: The building was possibly designed by the Vrana Brothers, who were also the contractors.
3. Original and subsequent owners: The Z.C.B.J. Hall stands on lots 15 and 16, block 5 of Starr's Addition. These lots were among the lots platted for public use following the devastating 1881 flood. Allen Bloomfield was the first purchaser of lot 15. Later George G. and Benjamin D. Bayha, both already owners of lot 16, purchased lot 15 from Bloomfield. In August 1909 the Bayha Brothers sold lots 15 and 16 to Z.C.B.J. Hall. Since then the hall has been the owner of these lots until its sale to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in 1974.

The original and subsequent owners of lots 15 and 16, block 5 of Starr's Addition to West Niobrara, from the Register of Deeds, Center, Knox County, Nebraska, are as follows:

- 1389 Deed July 19, 1889, recorded August 1, 1889, Book K, page 173, James Starr, original owner, to Allen Bloomfield. For consideration of \$3,000 for numerous lots including lot 15
- 1902 Deed February 24, 1902 recorded March 10, 1902, Book 27, page 500, Allen Bloomfield to George G. and Benjamin D. Bayha. For consideration of \$2,700 for numerous lots.
- 1909 Deed July 31, 1909, recorded August 18, 1909, Book 39, page 510, George G. and Benjamin D. Bayha to Z.C.B.J. Hall No. 53. For consideration of \$400 for lots 15 and 16.
- 1974 Deed November 8, 1974, recorded November 14, 1974, Book 96, page 477, Z.C.B.J. Hall No. 53 to U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. For consideration of \$26,000
4. Builder, contractor, suppliers: The original building contractors were the Vrana Brothers, based in Omaha, Nebraska. The following is reproduced from a building agreement by the Vrana Brothers regarding the building of Z.C.B.J. Hall, dated August 30, 1909, signed by Joseph F. Vrana for Vrana Brothers Contractors and Builders:
- "I agree to build the Hall, for rad Vysehrad ces 53 Z.C.B.J. according to the plans and specifications for the sum of \$8,692.00, Eight thousand six hundred ninety two dollars. The owners are to furnish all bricks, cut stone, metal ceiling, finish hardware and roofing. (Roofing to be put down by the owners). All work done in first class workmanship throughout."
- In January 1910 the building was only half completed. Another contractor, A. J. Johnson, also based in Omaha, was hired on March 10, 1910, to finish the construction of the hall. Wil Lundaak and Charles Melena did most of the carpentry work throughout the building. J. E. Starkey did the plastering work. Frank Lambert painted scenes in the stage area.
5. Original plan and construction: The following is a description of building plans of Z.C.B.J. Hall, probably derived from a local newspaper article dated August 5, 1909:

"Z.C.B.J. has purchased two lots just across from Hubbard House to erect 40' x 116' Opera House. Main Room - 40' x 100' with 24' stage, office and check rooms. Basement - 40' x 40' will be built for theatrical rooms, dining hall, etc. - expected to be completed by November 1909."

6. Alterations and additions: Only minor alterations have been made to the hall. Originally, lighting was provided by gas fixtures. In 1921, the hall was wired for electricity.

A standard fire escape exit on the north facade of the balcony level was installed in the early 1930s coming from the old Niobrara High School. The structure originally used a wooden ladder to the second story as means of emergency exit.

In the early 1930s, the front facade, showing signs of cracks, was secured by tie rods.

The original fencing evidenced in earlier views of the hall was replaced by the present fencing in the 1930s or early 1940s due to public abuse.

In the 1950s, the original coal burning furnace was replaced by the two gas furnaces.

B. Historical Events and Persons Connected with the Structure:

In February 1897, delegates from the midwestern states of Nebraska, Minnesota, Iowa, North Dakota and Wisconsin came together in Omaha, Nebraska, and agreed to break away from the National Czechoslovak Benevolent Society (Bohemian Slavonian Benevolent Society, C.S.P.S.) and form a new organization which would provide more of a sense of unity and it was hoped, be more attuned to the needs of the midwestern settler. The Zapadni Cesko-Bratreske Jednoty or the Western Bohemian Fraternal Organization was established.

Lodge Vysehrad No. 53 (named after a castle in Czechoslovakia) was organized June 19, 1898. F. H. Lenger was selected President; Joseph Kukral, Secretary; and Frederick Opocensky, Treasurer. While providing fraternal security, the organization also provided a modest life insurance and sick benefits, for its members.

In 1909, the lodge announced their plans to build a new brick lodge hall and began their donation campaign. Their plans attracted the interest and enthusiasm of the town's people and its dedication June 17, 1910, upon completion, was a major local event characterized by a parade and much Czech tradition and song.

The hall served as a social center for the Niobrara community, continually hosting national notables such as Lawrence Welk as well as local talent. Local and district meetings were held here as well as members' funerals, anniversary ceremonies, and school and community affairs requiring a good deal of space. Czechoslovakian Sokol gymnastic organizations often held their practices and exhibitions in Z.C.B.J. Halls and hence many were known as Sokol Halls. The organizations encourage their members to strive toward qualities characteristic of a falcon (Skol): strength and elegance of the body and courage and keenness of mind.

Originally, only persons of Czech descent were members. However, as more members intermarried with other nationalities, many non-Czechs have become associated with the organization. Of the two hundred sixty eight Z.C.B.J. lodges in existence, only fifty-seven still conduct their meetings in the Czech language. The Niobrara lodge has discontinued this custom.

One notable feature of the structure itself is in one corner of the building (thought to be the northeast location). A vault containing secret information relating to the organization had been built into the wall. The exact contents are unknown.

C. Sources of Information:

1. Old views:

Photocopy of front view of Z.C.B.J. Hall with original fence, circa 1910. Included in the HABS collection.

Photocopy of side view of the hall, circa 1910. Included in the HABS collection.

Photocopy of original stage curtain with local advertisements, date unknown. Included in the HABS collection.

Photocopy of original stage chairs in foreground, circa 1912. Included in the HABS collection.

Photocopy of side view of the hall, post 1914. Included in the HABS collection.

2. Bibliography:

a. Primary and unpublished sources:

Deed Books, Register of Deeds, Center, Knox County,  
Nebraska

Interviews:

Mrs. Marie Schwach, Niobrara, Nebraska, July 19, 1977  
Background information on organization, spatial uses,  
original contract for construction.

Letter from Lawrence Welk, Spring 1977, to Niobrara  
school children recalling a performance in the hall.

Correspondence:

Mr. Louis Skokan, Verdigre, Nebraska, July 23, 1977  
Information on structural alterations of the hall.

Building plans possibly held in the corner vault built  
into the northeast corner of the structure.

b. Secondary and published sources:

Niobrara Bicentennial Committee. Niobrara Centennial,  
1856-1956 (updated 1979). Niobrara, Nebraska: Verdigre  
Eagle, 1976.

Niobrara Tribune, newspaper articles, July 8, 1909,  
January 27, 1910, March 22, 1910, May 12, 1910, December  
15, 1910

Determination of eligibility information, 1976, held at  
the National Register of Historic Places, Washington, D.C.

Prepared by: Kathryn Burns  
Historian  
Historic American Buildings  
Survey  
Summer 1977

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: The Z.C.B.J. Hall is an impressive two-story brick structure. Its most significant exterior elements are found on the east (front) facade. The creative use of face brickwork results in decorative pilasters and an elaborate central arched window and cornice line. The building is an excellent example of the architecture of a typical Z.C.B.J. hall in Nebraska.
2. Condition of fabric: The building is in excellent condition.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions: The one-story building measures 40' (three-bay front) x 116' with a half basement and a balcony.
2. Foundations: The foundation is poured concrete.
3. Wall construction, finish and color: The front facade of the structure is of smooth-textured tan face brick with narrow reddish tint mortar joints, with the sides "quoined" into the corners. A concrete water table runs across the front facade. The rear and side walls are of standard red brick laid in common bond. Concrete sills and lintels are of a deep tan tone. The brick edges of the pilasters and window and door jambs are rounded. The lettering "Z.C.B.J." occupies the space above the front entrance and below the fanlight. Another lettering, "RAD VYSHERAD C. 53" was set centrally above the fanlight.
4. Structural system, framing: Brick bearing wall construction supports the ceiling and the roof of the structure.
5. Fire escapes, stoops: A metal fire escape provides exit from the balcony level at the northeast corner of the structure. A second smaller fire escape provides exit from the back stage area at the west (rear) end of the structure. A covered sunken stair provides exit from the kitchen area at the west end of the structure.
6. Chimneys: There are two chimneys within the south wall, and three chimneys in the north wall of the structure. All other chimney-like projections along the roofline are purely decorative.

7. Openings:

- a. Doorways and doors: A pair of white painted double doors, each with five rectangular raised panels set horizontally, provide entrance to the building. Two single wood doors are located halfway down the side of the building on the north and south walls. Similar doors are found in the rear and at the north balcony exit. Each door is composed of five rectangular raised panels set horizontally, painted white and topped by a concrete lintel. The basement "double door exit" is ornamented by a three-row segmental brick strip above the door.
- b. Windows: A six-light transom window appears just above the front entrance. A large eight-paned fanlight appears just above the transom and is surrounded by a decorative light-colored brick arch.

Two sets of simple one-over-one double hung sash windows flank the central entrance and provide light for the first floor and balcony levels. Six two-light casement windows provide light and ventilation to the basement level kitchen and eating area. These windows are set in semi-circular wells with brick header segmental arches over each. Single one-over-one double hung sash windows run along the north, south and west walls and provide light to the main auditorium and the back stage rooms.

8. Roof:

- a. Shape, covering: A shallow gable roof runs the length of the building and is obscured by a brick parapet in the front facade, covered by an assortment of mineral surface asbestos shingles.
- b. Cornice, eaves: A cornice and parapeted fronting, composed of decorative brick courses and the continuation of the pilasters in chimney-like projections, hide the shallow gable roof. A shallow peak in the center of the parapet echoes the roof pitch however.
- c. Flagpole: A wooden flagpole stands on top of the roof. This pole is square at its base and hexagonal at the top (it is unknown when this flagpole was added -- it does not appear in the earliest view but was thought to be added soon after the building's construction).



C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plan: The central entrance lobby (12' x 12') contains a ticket office area to the north and men's and ladies' rooms (originally cloak room) to the south. Front double doors lead into a 37' x 58' auditorium, which is a very large room. The east wall of the auditorium provides an entrance to the ladies room on the left and to the box office on the right as one faces the stage. Exit doors appear on either side of the auditorium.

A staircase to the left of the front double door entrance to the auditorium leads to the balcony, (18' x 20'), which is located above the lobby, box office and lavatories. A door on the north wall of the balcony level provides a second-story fire exit.

A proscenium stage stands at the west end of the auditorium. To the right side of the stage, stairs leads down to the basement. Another set of stairs, directly against the north wall and the basement stairs, leads to the backstage area. A third set of stairs, against the south wall to the left of the stage also leads to the stage level.

A door on the left west wall of the stage provides entry to the two rooms at the rear of the structure. The larger, northwest room is a lodge room where the meetings are held. The southwest room appears to have been used as a dressing room containing clothes hooks lining the sides of the walls.

The kitchen and dining area are located under the stage and back stage areas. Counters are used as serving space for buffet style eating and separates the kitchen from dining spaces. The dining area has four exposed posts supporting east-west running beams. The kitchen is located in the southwest corner. A room off this area to the east has always been the furnace room. The furnace room has a dug-out pit area in the center where most likely a boiler furnace stood. Doors from both the kitchen and dining area, set almost as double doors against the west wall, provide exit from the structure.

2. Stairways: Interior staircases leading to balcony, to upper stage level, and to basement are all of natural wood finish with a combination of turned and plain chambered balusters (probably replacements) and rectangular wood newel posts with decorative moldings.

3. Flooring: Two- and three-inch wide even wood flooring is found throughout the structure. The entrance lobby floor is poured concrete with smooth finish and articulated expansion joints. The date of construction, 1909, is set in brass numerals in the center of the floor. The kitchen and dining area is concrete also. The rest rooms have linoleum tile flooring.
4. Wall and ceiling finish: Greenish-blue painted plaster walls with wide finished wood baseboards are found throughout the structure. A contrasting darker green appears in the auditorium between the baseboard and wide chairrailing. Wide chairrails are also found in the lodge meeting room. The ceiling in the auditorium is an ornate pattern pressed tin with a similar decorative cornice. Plaster ceilings are found in stage and backroom areas as well as the basement level.
5. Openings:
  - a. Doorways and doors: Most interior doors are rectangular raised panels set horizontally (as found on the side and rear exit doors). Others such as the meeting room door, men's room door, and kitchen door are standard four-panel, vertically set doors. All are of natural wood finish. Many interior door heads are decorated with a pediment-like molding treatment. Doors (four-panel vertically set) separating the auditorium from the lower level are positioned halfway down the stairs.
  - b. Windows: Two one-over-one double hung sash windows are oddly placed on the west wall separating the stage and the lodge rock, their purpose unknown.
6. Decorative features and trim: Stage curtains serve as a prominent decorative feature. One hand-painted curtain with a scene of a northern European city is used to close the stage. This drop was painted by H. Farsky A SPOL - of Chicago. Another hand-painted curtain contained local Niobrara business advertisements set in a stage-like scene. Apparatus for hanging curtains and scenery in the catwalk along the north wall of stage are still there. Hand-painted murals are on either side of the stage (floral pattern). A framed painting with the lodge name and Z.C.B.J. is centrally located over the stage. The base of the stage facing the public had naturally finished tongue-and-groove woodwork.

Another hand-painted mural with a mountain scene is found in the south wall above the exit door.

7. Hardware: Many interior and exterior door handles and plates are notable. The brass doorplates are oval with floral-detailed borders. The entry door handle is rectangular, considerably longer and having more ornate detailing around the perimeter of the plate.

8. Mechanical equipment:

- a. Heating: Originally a hot water coal furnace in the basement provided heat for the hall. There were ten radiators in the hall at that time. In the 1950s, this heating system was replaced by the "Coleman" gas heaters found on either side of the stage doorways. A wood or coal (in this case, corn cob) "quick heat" space heater sits in the box office.
- b. Lighting: Modern suspended incandescent fixtures are used throughout except the stage area, which is lighted by twelve stage lights.

- D. Site:

1. General setting and orientation: The building faces east on the west side of Fifth Avenue, a half block south of Elm Street, the main street of Niobrara.

Prepared by: Perry Benson  
Architect  
Historic American Buildings  
Survey  
Summer 1977  
and  
Kathryn Burns  
Historian  
Historic American Buildings  
Survey  
Summer 1977

PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

The Niobrara project was undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) in co-operation with the citizens of the Village of Niobrara. The project was funded by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Omaha District, in compliance with Executive Order 11593 as a mitigative effort in the construction of the Gavins Point Dam and Lewis and Clark Lake. Under the direction of John Poppeliers, chief of HABS, the project was completed in the HABS Field Office in Niobrara, Nebraska during the summer of 1977 by project supervisor Perry Benson (University of Pennsylvania), project historian Kathryn A. Burns (George Washington University), team foreman Larry Jones (Texas Tech University) and student architects Peter Darlow (McGill University), Lisa Becker (Notre Dame University) and Darl Rastorfer (University of Pennsylvania). The written historical and architectural data was prepared by Kathryn Burns, and edited by Susan McCown, a historian in the HABS office in August 1979. Three exterior and two interior photos were taken by Sam Amato in the fall of 1977.